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Bipartisan Congressional Delegation Sees Progress in Colombia

MEDDELLIN, COLOMBIA—Secretary of Commerce Carlos M. Gutierrez today concluded his third bipartisan U.S. Congressional delegation visit to Colombia in recent months to highlight the significant progress that the country has made toward increased economic prosperity, strong democratic governance, the protection of human rights and the opportunities for U.S. exporters.

“The Uribe Administration has made great progress in promoting social justice, democracy and stability in Colombia,” said Gutierrez. “President Uribe and Colombia have reduced poverty, promoted economic growth and job creation. The U.S.-Colombia trade deal will give Colombia the vital tools needed to keep that forward momentum while removing export barriers for U.S. farmers, workers and business.”

The congressional delegation included: Rep. Ben Chandler (D-KY-6); Rep. Yvette Clarke (D-NY-11); Rep. Mike Conaway (R-TX-11); Rep. Wally Herger (R-CA-2); Rep. Stephanie Tubbs Jones (D-OH-11); Rep. Gregory Meeks (D-NY-6); Rep. John Salazar (D-CO-3); Sen. Gordon Smith (R-OR); and Rep. Melvin Watt (D-NC-12).

The three-day visit started in Cartagena, Colombia on Saturday, November 17, where the U.S. delegation met with Labor Violence Prosecutor Sandra Castro to discuss the government’s plans regarding the prosecution of those who attack trade unionists. The delegation also met with Mayor Sergio Fajardo to discuss Medellin’s positive economic turnaround.

On Sunday the delegation met with President Alvaro Uribe and his Cabinet to discuss the pending trade agreement with Colombia. The delegation participated in a “town hall” meeting led by President Uribe in Parimentral, an Afro-Colombian neighborhood of Cartagena being revitalized by the Colombian government. During the various site visits and the session on the visit, the delegation saw how the United States and Colombian governments are working together to improve the quality of life for Afro-Colombians, displaced citizens and indigenous Colombians. Such efforts include helping local youths

receive job training, mental health counseling, and job placement assistance in an effort to boost formal employment and entrepreneurship.

The visit concluded in Medellin on Sunday on Monday, Gutierrez and the delegation toured Santo Domingo Savio, a portion of Medellin once so dangerous that police officers could not patrol it – where they saw the Uribe Administration’s commitment to promoting positive economic and social change and the significant reduction in the level of violence in Colombia. They also witnessed Colombia’s plans for integrating former paramilitary members—known in Colombia as the “demobilized”—back into civil society and the formal economy.

On Monday the delegation met with labor leaders that both support and oppose the agreement. They discussed the Uribe Administration’s efforts to reduce violence against trade unionists and address concerns from Members of Congress on human rights issues.

The last visit was to a flower farm on the outskirts of Medellin. The fresh-cut flower industry in Colombia has emerged as a sustainable alternative to drug crop production. Fresh-cut flower exports have been a major success story under the Andean Trade Promotion and Drug Eradication Act (ATPDEA), with exports to the United States valued at \$450 million in 2006. The industry employs over 110,000 Colombians directly, many of whom are female heads of household, displaced persons and or members of the indigenous community. These flower exports enter the U.S. market duty-free and this trade supports an estimated 230,000 U.S. jobs, according to the Association of Colombian Flower Exporters.

ATPDEA and Plan Colombia have helped to improve the economy and reduce violence throughout the country. Congress has already given Colombian exporters free access to the U.S. market through ATPDEA. The Colombia Trade Promotion Agreement would remove barriers U.S. businesses and agriculture face when exporting to Colombia and help create higher paying jobs in the United States.